

Environment

## As Millions of Acres Burn, Firefighters Say the U.S. Forest Service Has Left Them With Critical Shortages

The agency recently said that it had reached 101% of its firefighter hiring goal for 2024, but those on the front lines say the agency is understating how badly depleted their ranks are, especially for experienced firefighters.



The Park Fire in Chico, California, has been burning since July 24. Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu via Getty Images

by **Abe Streep**

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On July 18, federal wildfire managers placed the nation under a designation known as Preparedness Level 5 — bureaucratic code for all hands on deck or, as one veteran wildland firefighter called it, “fire DEFCON.” In layman’s terms, Preparedness Level 5 means that the country’s wildland firefighting resources are spread thin, more blazes are imminent, and supervisors of local crews are reluctant to allow them to travel far from home to help elsewhere. This marks only the fourth time in the past two decades that the country has reached such a state so early in the calendar year. So far, more than 5 million acres have burned nationwide, tripling last year’s total, and there are still months to go in fire season.

Nine days after the country entered Preparedness Level 5, the U.S. Forest Service — the largest of the five federal agencies responsible for fighting wildfires, with more than 11,000 firefighters — said that it had reached 101% of its hiring goal for 2024. However, firefighters on the ground say that the agency is understating how badly depleted their ranks are.

Overall numbers are hard to obtain, but according to data provided by a dispatcher who works for the Bureau of Land Management, 2,417 nationwide requests for crucial fire resources — everything from radio operators to task force leaders — had gone unfilled through July 26. Those requests were delivered to all five federal agencies as well as to state and private organizations. What was especially alarming, the dispatcher said, was the lack of experienced firefighters: “It tells us we have critical shortages in

certain particular middle- and upper-level operational qualifications.”

Eric Franta, who works at a Forest Service helicopter air base in Oregon, told me his unit was staffed at only 75%. (In a profession where fears of workplace retaliation are widespread, the only wildland firefighters willing to share their names are those that have roles with the National Federation of Federal Employees, the union representing wildland firefighters. Franta is a union steward.) Another Forest Service wildland firefighter in Oregon said, “We’re not able to fill any crews.” Firefighters in California are reporting similar issues. According to interagency data obtained by ProPublica, 90 of the approximately 270 Forest Service fire engines in the state were unavailable for service on Aug. 12. Engines may be unavailable for a variety of reasons, such as mechanical maintenance or crews on mandatory leave, but firefighters say this number is unusually high. On the same day, according to the data, at least a third of the statewide Hotshot crews — elite teams that fight large wilderness fires — were not staffed sufficiently to operate as intended.

In March, ProPublica reported that the nation’s wildland firefighting force was experiencing an exodus, especially among its most highly qualified firefighters. In the past three years, the Forest Service lost 45% of its permanent employees, forcing it to fill its ranks with inexperienced firefighters. Those inside and outside the service cite numerous reasons for the departures. Wildland firefighters are compensated poorly; base pay is \$15 an hour, roughly what a fast-food server makes. (In 2021, Congress passed a measure that added a temporary retention bonus for firefighters, which is still in effect but has not been made permanent.) The federal civil service structure makes it difficult for wildland firefighters to maintain a career. And the Forest Service especially has been slow to address the health risks involved with suppressing wildland fires. Although the Department of Labor now considers cancer a work-related illness for wildland firefighters, the multiagency preparedness guide for incoming recruits still doesn’t mention the word.

When asked about the disparity between its 101% staffing figure and the dire assessments of firefighters on the ground, a Forest Service spokesperson wrote, “We have some gaps in critical leadership roles due to departure of experienced leaders and managers with years of knowledge and expertise.” The spokesperson added, “If those roles are not able to be filled by qualified and experienced individuals, it can result in operational inefficiencies.”

During one day last week, the federal government reported 123 newly started fires. A number of them were in and around Idaho’s Boise National Forest, where Morgan Thomsen, a union steward and a Forest Service firefighter on a Wyoming helicopter crew, was working. There were not enough firefighters to fill the crews to catch them all, he told me. “The new fires are all big now too, but hardly anyone is on them,” he texted. “The system is being stressed and can’t deal with it. Now, it depends on the weather and site conditions whether these fires will be put out before they burn down houses and so on. We’ve effectively lost our asses and are triaging.”

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